

Gender and culture differences in today's classrooms

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Abstract

In the past three decades the increasing classroom diversity casted a light on the instructional and technical issues that were not taken into consideration before. Multicultural classrooms have advanced great responsibilities on teachers to promote culturally responsive teaching and balancing culture and gender within their mini societies. Teachers are challenged by the complicated task of accommodating each and every student's culture and various gender roles. The questions that rise here are: "What do we teach and how?" "Whose culture do we teach?" "Do teachers know what the gender roles are in students' home countries?" "Are teachers aware of their own cultural identity, biases, beliefs, and attitudes?" This study tries to take into consideration the possible answers to these questions and the issues highlighted in these questions to promote engagement and participation in class communication for everyone. The article is based on the findings of the multicultural communicative classroom observation in International Black Sea University, Faculty of Education, English Philology bachelor level.

Key words: Class participation, gender differences, forming groups, ethics of participation

1. Introduction

Most of teachers assume that participating in classroom discussions is a necessary part of successful performance. Moreover, class participation in most cases is formally evaluated. Have teachers investigated students' cultural constraints? Have they been counseled on a delicate issue of equal participation between male and female students?

There are many researches proving how men and women differ in classroom participation, leading conversation, answering and posing questions, using talk time, having the floor, expressing own view points, and using language. Vandrick (2000) wrote that many instructors complain about students' active contribution in discussion. He stated, instructors know that the reasons don't come out of the laziness of students but from more complex issues like, different educational culture the students have experienced back in their homelands.

According to Swann (1992) the research on gender differentiation in the classroom showed that boys are more comfortable in speaking in the classroom than girls. Boys and girls tend to sit separately; in group work students are happy to work in single-sex groups rather than mix-sex ones.

Let's start analyzing by saying that speaking in classroom involves putting oneself forward in front of students who will challenge the speakers ideas (in the best situation and not the speaker herself or himself), intelligence, knowledge of language. Women who by their nature and by their usage of language stress solidarity rather than power and status in the case of men tend to be relatively silent and not participate. They do not feel safe and secure.

Instructors who value culturally responsive teaching should create safe space for every student by for example, starting discussion which will not be challenged or setting the small group work which is favored by women.

Holt (1995) suggested multiple activities that will appeal to the learners' diverse background. Teachers have potential to help indirectly integrate culture into the classroom by: introducing topics where students discuss their experiences, knowledge and expertise. Even silent students can be seen talking about their hometowns, families, cultural events, traditions. By using instructional strategies and materials that permit stu-

dents to introduce their culture to the classroom, teachers will promote discussions and integrate all students in the learning process.

Different ethics of participation express itself in many ways. Men, who often speak in classrooms consider it their job to provide various arguments, while women try to avoid getting the floor. Men think that women have nothing to say and women think that men talk nonsense and even sometimes hint teacher not to pay attention to their words.

The role of an instructor is to promote cultural literacy, integrate different teaching styles, and act as model in diversity respect.

2. Literature review

Yepez (1994) investigated the history of sexism and silencing of women in some cultures. He stated that these issues lead to inequality of treatment of males and females. Men's strong verbal skills overwhelm female voices.

Cochran (1994) focused on four suggestions for teachers to deal with sexual stereotyping in ESL classrooms.

- Student empowering should have clear opportunities to discuss their feelings.
- Reading students (understanding of their body language, tone, nonverbal cues).
- Modeling non-sexist language for students.
- Being aware of the essence of sexism and language.

Cochran believed that above mentioned strategies would work to open safe space for strongly marginalized female students.

Nault (1991) discusses the implicit level of classroom environment, which starts with teachers teaching "who we are." We remember who our teachers were as people, where as we don't remember what they taught us. This means that teachers continuously teach their values, culture, biases, politics, cognitive styles in addition to the intended curriculum. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that teachers being well aware of their preferences and unconscious tendencies. If they are unaware of how implicit level works than they don't know what they

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teach. When we pose a question whose culture to teach, we have to assume that all cultures have values because their contribution in creating the human knowledge in the world is huge. The peoples represented by these cultures are to be respected equally as they have created these cultures. In the US there is a trend of shifting away from the philosophy of melting pot to a philosophy of cultural pluralism. It creates a new society with diverse social, racial, and religious backgrounds (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

3. Goals of the study

This study is conducted to identify gender and culture differences in classroom participation and find the ways that may help teachers promote safe learning environment which is conducive to every student. The goal also involves students' assistance in effectively engaging in classroom interactions. It is important for learners and teachers to become more aware of classroom dynamics and their own preferences that will result in treating all classroom participants in an appropriate way.

Method

For the purposes of this study qualitative and quantitative research methods were adopted. I have conducted classroom observation and then a questionnaire for students was introduced.

I processed the observation in freshmen class of teacher training program in International Black Sea University. The class consists of 22 students out of which 9 students are male and 13 students are females. Besides two females who are Georgian all other students are Turkish. With the exception of 3 men all the men spoke occasionally. Of the women, three (1 Georgian and 2 Turkish) were moderate talkers. If compared with three active participant men they were less demonstrative.

I worked out three ways of grouping:

1. Big group and small group
2. Males and females (separately and mixed)
3. Fast talkers and slow talkers

Students were asked to assess their participation level in different groups. The groups had to discuss case studies related to subject. Every student participated in each kind of groups, except Turkish girls who refused to be engaged in mixed-sex groups.

After the observation a questionnaire was distributed for them to show their preference. I used online survey software package www.surveymonkey.com to create a questionnaire. Following link will allow you to see the questionnaire: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5N96NTY>

4. Results

Based on my observation I can say that Turkish girls were very happy to form single-sex groups and those who never participate in class in individual work, like answering questions, stating their opinions, discussing, were very lively in groups with only girls. Moreover, silent students were very active in smaller groups. They were raising hands for clarification and all contributing for the common good of the group. I even had to remind them discussion rules from our classroom social contract as their engagement and disputes appeared disruptive for other groups. The observation of Georgian girls in mixed-sex

groups showed quite high engagement level but every time the group presenter was chosen from male students.

Observing male students confirmed that small and slow talkers groups work better for passive students. Those who never contribute to big groups were quite busy in smaller ones.

Now let me present the questionnaire results.

Question 1: What do you think about group work?

Out of 13 girls 12 think that group work is *Very useful*. Only one girl has marked *useful*.

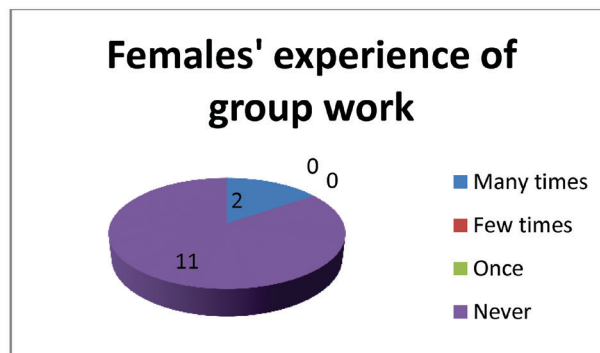
Out of 9 boys all think that group work is *Very useful*.

Question 2: Which group did you find more attractive?

This question allowed to tick several choices out of 6. So, 7 girls think *Small groups* are very useful and 5 out of those 7 favored simultaneously *Single-sex* groups. Only two girls have chosen *Mixed-sex* groups and they were Georgians. One girl marked *Fast talkers* and another one answered *Quiet talkers*.

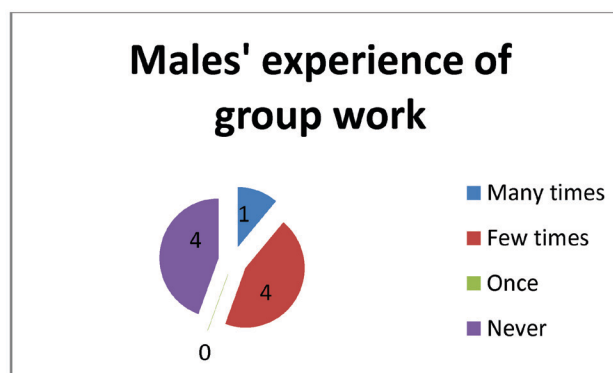
Majority of boys favored *Small groups* and *Fast talkers*. Only one thinks *Mixed groups* is beneficial and 2 ticked *Single-sex groups*.

Question 3: Have you worked in mixed-sex groups in your home settings before?



Majority of girls (11) have answered *Never* to this question. Only two Georgian girls had positive answers.

However, four boys answered that they have worked in



groups *Few times* and another four marked *Never*. Only one ticked *Many times*.

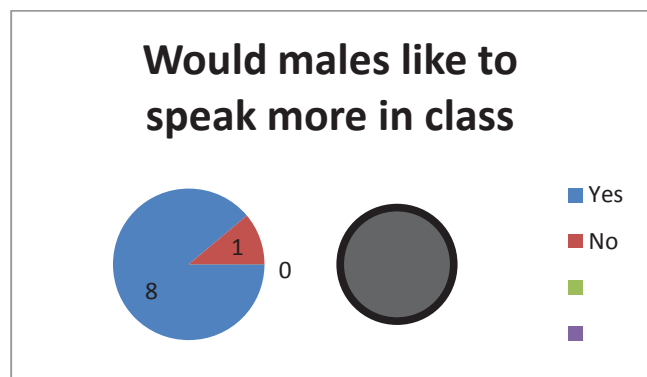
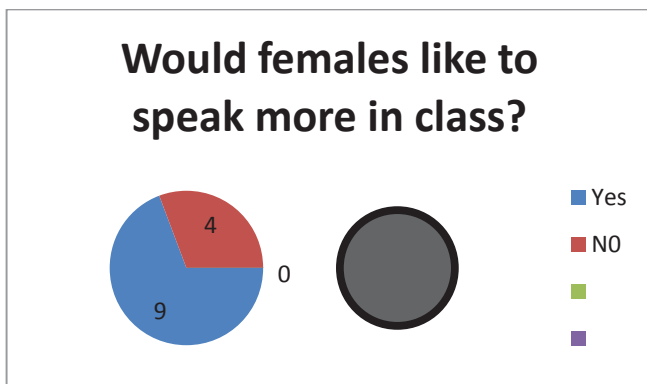
Question 4: Would you expect your male and female teachers' behavior to be different?

None of the female participants have chosen *Yes* on this question. However, 2 male students expect that female and male teachers should behave differently.

Question 5: Would you like to speak in class more than you do?

Majority of girls think that they would like to talk more.

Only four of them ticked *No*.



Majority of boys feel that they would like to talk more and only one ticked *No*.

3. Conclusion

Raising the awareness of gender and culture differences among students will make the today's classrooms favorable for all participants.

Teachers' deep understanding of students' different social and educational cultures will help learners to feel safe and secure in the classroom.

Study revealed that majority of female and male students are eager to speak more in case they find the proper situation for them.

It is significant how focusing on group work and participation in class raised students awareness of class participation. Teaching, taking into consideration different cognitive styles, differences in using language by male and female students, their contrasting wishes of taking the floor and contributing in class, balancing the gender peculiarities will give opportunity to everyone to participate.

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